

School students in Germany protest and enforce online teaching to combat coronavirus infection

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In response to the German government's murderous coronavirus policy, which puts profits before health and lives, students and pupils in Germany are taking the fight against the pandemic into their own hands. Many school student initiatives are preparing strikes and protests and in the city of Bremen pupils from two high schools, with the support of teaching staff, have taken emergency action to combat the disease and save lives. The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Meret Göhring, who attends the Leibnizplatz high school in Bremen.

"Our secondary level 2 has been on strike since Tuesday evening," she said. "As a student council, we worked closely with teachers to ensure that pupils could attend face-to-face classes on a voluntary basis only for the last three days. With this measure we managed to cut the number of classroom contacts by almost half.

"We knew the teaching faculty was behind us and also had encouragement and the unofficial support of the upper school leadership. Teachers in our upper school have been digitally streaming their classes via Zoom. That initially took place on Wednesday without approval until the upper school administration officially stated in the afternoon that no absences could be logged if pupils attended class online from their homes."

In Frankfurt, where the head of the health department is publicly downplaying the pandemic, 300 students took part in a school strike last week and held a rally in the city centre to demand safe education. The protest adhered to the prevailing coronavirus prevention requirements.

The Hesse state student initiative unverantwortlich.org (irresponsible.org), which has published photo statements from students, also organised a school strike on Friday. In a social media post, the group had called on all students not to go to class and instead participate in an online rally, which took place from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

"It's all about profits and allowing parents to continue going to work," explained moderator Ronja. "We are being

told that economic interests are more important than the well-being of the people. Lufthansa is laying off 50,000 staff and still receives €9 billion. At the same time, there is supposedly no money for air filtration systems in classrooms."

In Bremen, there have already been several strikes and protests: "For weeks, students and teachers have been demanding smaller learning groups to reduce the risk of infection," writes Bremen's Kurt-Schumacher-Allee (KSA) high school on its website. "The student body of our upper school is committed to achieving this."

In consultation with the school administration, the pupils' council has organised alternating classes throughout the upper school for the past two weeks. Speaking to a Bremen regional magazine *Buten un binnen*, one teacher, Desiree Baumann, said teaching staff were "very grateful to the students for this action"—many teachers were "pleased with the initiative" due to the risk of infection in what were often run-down and dilapidated classrooms. The school's principal Christian Sauter said he was "impressed by the breadth of the pupils' ideas and responsibility." He thought the pupils' intervention was "terrific."

As Meret reports, the mood among teachers has also quickly reached boiling point: "The teachers are 99 percent behind us students. As soon as you approach them outside of the context of the classroom, they open up and one realises we're all on the same page. But we cannot openly confirm the backing from teachers by name because they could get in trouble with the school board."

In fact, school authorities have reacted with open hostility to the pupils' intervention, which has met with the support, admiration and gratitude of teachers and principals. Bremen's education senator, Claudia Bogedan (SPD), for example, let it be known that half-size groups would be introduced only after the infection rate exceeded 200 (per 100,000 persons) and a quarter of the class was already in quarantine. "Blanket" alternate teaching, Bogedan told the

press, was “disproportionate given the current incidence figures.” The seven-day infection rate in Bremen is currently 108, according to the Robert Koch Institute (RKI). This is more than double the threshold the RKI and WHO set in spring to identify Europe-wide COVID hotspots.

“The school authorities are completely opposed to it (i.e., alternate teaching to reduce class sizes) and the closure of schools is out of the question,” Meret declared. In the case of the Lloyd Gymnasium in Bremerhaven, the authorities went so far as to politically intervene and counter the independent initiative undertaken by pupils. Luca Lennox Püchel, a member of a pupils’ initiative in Bremerhaven, told *Buten un Binnen* that the pupils’ council had worked out and decided on similar measures but that the school authorities had insisted on maintaining compulsory attendance. It was “incomprehensible,” declared the pupils’ representative, that “a magistrate cancels a student action in a press release without talking to us first.”

The arrogant reaction of the authorities expresses their fear of the growing resistance on the part of pupils, students, teachers and workers in Germany and throughout Europe. In Bremerhaven, around 200 pupils at Lloyd Gymnasium enforced a day of home teaching earlier this month. Previously, in another strike action, about 700 students at the Carl von Ossietzky school boycotted face-to-face classes.

At the same time, the very same authorities are sabotaging measures for remote teaching: “Because we still haven’t received the iPads promised by the school authorities, many students are forced to continue going to school. Class examinations are continuing. There are cases where we have to write four tests per week. I myself have had to write exams continuously for four hours.” All of this, he said, is taking place under the permanent risk of contagion and freezing temperatures in classrooms with open windows.

“The prevailing policies show no consideration for pupils and their families,” says Lennart (17) from Achim, near Bremen. Lennart is in the 12th grade at the Cato Bontjes van Beek Gymnasium. “We are in attendance every day with the whole school, although the infection rate in our district is almost 200,” he reports. “The fact that in-person classes just keep going under these conditions is mind-boggling. Learning is only partially the focus. Mainly, it’s about putting pupils somewhere so their parents can go back to work.”

In her government statement Wednesday, Merkel reiterated that closing schools was out of the question for the German government. Referring to “global contexts” and “economic power relations in the world” that were being refashioned in the wake of the pandemic, she threatened, “We have drawn the conclusion from the experience of last spring: we will do everything in our power to keep day-care

centres and schools open. We will do everything we can to keep nurseries and schools open.”

In their conference call on Sunday, the German chancellor and the state premiers decided not to close a single company outside the retail sector despite the dramatic situation. All that was left was a request to the corporate leaders to extend any company vacations. There will also be no unified school closures. So that workers can continue to go to the factories to increase the profits of the rich, only those children for whom this is “possible” are to stay at home. All others are to be able to continue to be cared for in school and day-care centres.

Under the circumstances, Lennart said, comprehensive emergency measures were vital: “I can only support the strikes against in-person teaching. Schools must be closed and opportunities for online teaching expanded. Too many lives are at stake.”

As Meret points out, it is of utmost importance that pupils organise independently. “Politicians are simply unwilling to do what is in our interests—so we have to do it ourselves,” Meret concludes. “With our pupils’ strike, we have achieved more protection against infection with a few hours of preparation than all of the measures taken by Bremen’s politicians in recent months. No one will stand up for us pupils other than ourselves. This is a conclusion reached by more and more people.”

Uniting all students in the fight for safe education, Meret said, showed enormous potential: “But our strike also shows that it is possible if we stand together. If all pupils stayed home for a few days, it would send a very strong signal.”

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) is calling on students and pupils across Europe to organise independent action committees and unite across Europe in a struggle directed not only against the political authorities and governments, but also against the capitalist system. Register now to join the action committees.



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